

## Stags Leap District Cabernet Sauvignon 2021—An Outstanding Vintage

By [Tom Hyland](#), Contributor. Tom Hyland writes about wine (and sometimes) food from Europe and US.

Published Feb 17, 2025, 11:30am EST, Updated Feb 17, 2025, 11:11pm EST



Overview of the Stags Leap District, Napa Valley PHOTO BY ROCCO CESELIN

The Stags Leap District is one of the best-known areas for Cabernet Sauvignon in Napa Valley, thanks in large part to the cooler weather of this southern sector of the valley, one in which early afternoon fog permeates the vineyards, moderating the climate. The fresh nights here combined with the warm temperatures during the day are an ideal combination for yielding elegantly styled versions of Cabernet Sauvignon that have captured the palates and hearts of many wine lovers; the quality of Cabernet Sauvignon from the Stags Leap District is as exceptional as it is distinctive.

The recent 2021 vintage, considered outstanding by almost every local producer, was one for the ages, and the producers of the Stags Leap District crafted some of their finest wines in several years. I recently interviewed four producers of Cabernet Sauvignon from the district, and asked them all the same two questions:

- **Briefly, what makes the Stags Leap District such a distinctive area for Cabernet Sauvignon (or other Bordeaux red varieties)? What**

**characteristics do you look for when producing an SLD Cabernet Sauvignon?**

- I know that 2021 was an amazing vintage for Cabernet Sauvignon in the Stags Leap District and throughout Napa Valley. What can you tell me about the growing season that year? What made it so remarkable? Was it less problematic in the vineyards and especially the cellar? How does your 2021 compare to recent vintages? In a few words, how special is your 2021? How long can one age the wine?**

Here are their responses:



Josh Widaman, Estate Winemaker, Pine Ridge Vineyards PHOTO COURTESY STAGS LEAP DISTRICT WINEGROWERS

***Joshua D.M. Widaman, Estate Winemaker of Pine Ridge Vineyards and President of the Stags Leap District Winegrowers Association***

Our one-mile wide, three-mile long slice of heaven is made so distinctive thanks to its orography. With the Stags Leap Palisades to the East and Wappo Hill to the West, our "valley within a valley" shelters us from the San Pablo Bay "respiration" that occurs through Yountville. Therefore, while Cabernet Sauvignon has a decidedly cranberry expression only 1 mile West of us, the fog blanket that rests over our vineyards and tempers our climate renders fruit that provides boisterous blueberry fruit flavors

For me, the Cabernet Sauvignon that is produced within our appellation is the single greatest expression of this noble grape in the world. I started working with this fruit 27 vintages ago, and I've dedicated about 1/3rd of my career to fruit from this neighborhood. So, for me, these distinctive flavors are like home cooking!

Honing in and focusing these blueberry (juice to compote, depending upon the vineyard location within the District) flavors are well matured, fine grained tannins that are intensely concentrated, and extremely rich in presentation. This is what we mean when we say that wines from this place have power reminiscent of "an iron fist in a velvet glove".

While I am partial to our four distinctly different expressions of Stags Leap District Cabernet (as a virtue of our four separate parcels within the appellation, spanning 47 acres total, and separated by about two miles) I firmly believe that no matter what brand of wine you select at your local purveyor, as long as it says "Stags Leap District" on the bottle, you should find these two hallmarks of our wines: blue fruit and rich, velvety tannins. These flavors are undeniable to me, and the reason that I am proud to not only be the Estate Winemaker at Pine Ridge Vineyards, but also the President of the Stags Leap District Winegrowers Association.

2021 was most amazing for me because it was my first vintage at the helm of Pine Ridge Vineyards. That being said, it was the vintage of this decade thus far in my opinion.

There were a confluence of factors that dialed in the vintage just right for us. First, it was the driest season since the last of the drought years (2017). Second, it was a very temperate growing season. It was not too warm, not too cold... Goldilocks! Third, and I would say most importantly, bloom and veraison each went from start to finish in about a week. This meant that peak ripeness was as uniform in each vineyard block as you could possibly ask for. So, once Gustavo Avina (our Viticulture Director of over 20 years) and his team got the vines manicured to perfection, all that was left for me was to not screw up the pick date, extraction and elevage!

2020 through 2024 have been the most different vintages that I have experienced in my 27 years in the industry. We all know how 2020 fared. 2021 is the most rich and bold in my opinion. 2022 is the juiciest, most floral, and most ready to drink. 2023 is the most classic, with savory notes and a knife's edge vibrancy of tannin typically seen in Right Bank Bordeaux. 2024 is still going through malolactic. So, I have some hopes and expectations that it will finish in a similar vein to 2021, but I like to reserve my full opinion until we have the wines snugly put to bed in their barrels for elevage.

*Our 2021 is the best vintage of the last decade that we currently have in bottle. I expect it to be firing on all cylinders in about 10 years, with the ability to age gracefully for 30 years or more.*



Elizabeth Vianna, Winemaker/General Manager, Chimney Rock Vineyards PHOTO COURTESY STAGS LEAP DISTRICT WINEGROWERS

### ***Elizabeth Vianna, Winemaker/General Manager, Chimney Rock Winery***

The unique configuration of geology, geography and climate intersect in Stags Leap District to create a magical trifecta for ripening perfection in Bordeaux varieties. The reflective heat of the Palisades gift us with beautiful ripe and silky tannins. The San Pablo bay natural air conditioning which funnels cool air between the low hills to the west and the Vaca range gifts our Bordeaux reds with great natural acidity, another marker of our cooler AVA. Add to that our beautifully well drained ancient volcanic soils and you have the dirt to produce small and concentrated berries with lots of color and phenolics. The primary characteristics I look for in producing SLD are beautiful texture, freshness in flavor and great acidity.

The 2021 growing season started as a classic drought year, and what we thought would be an extremely early harvest. We had lower than average rainfall during the winter, and not a drop of rain from April through October. The arrival of more moderate weather in August and September, allowed us to wait for great flavor development. Although we had a later finish than we expected, the mid-October harvest end still qualifies as an early harvest. Our yields were lower, but the quality was incredible with lots of color, concentration, and beautiful aromatics. The slow even ripening that we were gifted in 2021 was a winemaker's dream. Perhaps it was simply Mother Nature's gift back to us

after the challenges of 2020! *This is a beautiful age-worthy vintage that can be cellared 25-30 years if you can resist these beautiful bottles.*



Alison Rodriguez, winemaker, Silverado Vineyards PHOTO BY ROCCO CESELIN

### ***Alison Rodriguez, Winemaker, Silverado Vineyards***

The Stags Leap District is such an amazing growing district for Cabernet Sauvignon and other deeply structured red varieties since it was the first sub-AVA in Napa to be designed around a very distinctive soil type, namely iron-rich weathered granitic soils. Iron-rich soils are recognized the world over for producing elegant and powerful Cabernets, and Stags Leap District has them in abundance. Elegance and power – right from our terroir to your glass.

*2021 was a terrific growing season, a true ‘goldilocks’ vintage – neither too warm nor too cool.* At Silverado Vineyards, we benefit from our location right along the Napa River, which funnels cooling breezes right up to our hillside vineyards after long, warm days in the summer sun. This dynamic helps build ripe, dark, black fruit flavors in our Cabernet, while maintaining freshness and tension on the palate.





Ludovic Dervin, General Manager /Senior Winemaker, Stags' Leap Winery PHOTO COURTESY STAGS LEAP DISTRICT WINEGROWERS

## ***Ludovic Dervin | General Manager – Senior Winemaker, Stags' Leap Winery***

Stags Leap District is the smallest appellation of Napa Valley, and an extremely unique location in terms of soil profiles and climate. Being at the foothill of the Palisade cliffs, wind and water erosion over time created some rhyolite igneous deposits into the soils that mingled with the rich fluvial soils of the Napa River and over time it created an alluvial rocky mix that has a perfect balance of silt, clay and sand... giving a good balance of water retention and drainage that allows varietals like Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot on Petite Sirah to thrive.

From a temperature perspective, the dark cliffs of the palisades on the East facing slopes accumulate a lot of heat during the day, and when that heat is released in the evening, it creates a temperature chimney effect that pulls in the cold air from the nearby Pacific Ocean, which is made of cold water coming down from Alaska. Even in Summer the water is very cold, and this regulates a natural air conditioning effect that allows to cool down the vineyards very early in the day and maintains cold temperatures at night.

That cold temperature is critical for the style of wines we want to produce in the Stags Leap District as it preserves the natural acid balance of the grapes. We intend to make wine with bright and fresh fruit notes, and a lot of complexity... To achieve that goal, we need to pay a lot of attention to the sugar/acid balance of the grapes to make to best educated decision on when to pick.

If the weather stays too hot at night, the grapes burn their natural acidity and tend to create wines lacking freshness and balance and delivering a wine style with a lot of overripe jammy flavors. While such wine could be very plush and enjoyable young, they do not tend to age as gracefully over the years. *The Stags Leap District usually delivers wines that are more “old world style”, with a great balance between richness, power, complexity, while retaining a lot of freshness and elegance, like some classic Bordeaux blends.*

The 2021 season was joyous and welcomed, producing exceptionally high-quality fruit, some of the best in recent years. Rain early in the year led to almost no notable precipitation for the rest of the season, providing an ideal environment for grapes to flower, bloom, and set in early spring, with budbreak early in April, followed by flowering and bloom in May.

The summer saw early and even ripening throughout the valley, with veraison appearing in early July. Low yields (in part due to drought conditions), created fruit that is intensely flavored and smaller in berry size. One of the earliest starts, harvest began with white wine grapes coming in towards late July, while red wine grapes arrived about a month later, at the end of August. With optimal ripening and taste, we were able to take our time bringing grapes in, crafting wines of fantastic character, with amazing color extraction, aromatic intensity, tremendous balance, and structure, that are equally lush and fruity.

*It was a tremendous year that produced collector wines for the long haul, with ageability well over 20 years.*



Pine Ridge Vineyards, Stags Leap District PHOTO COURTESY OF STAGS LEAP DISTRICT WINEGROWERS

Here are my notes on the 2021 Stags Leap District Cabernet Sauvignons from these four producers:

**Pine Ridge Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon 2021 Stags Leap District** (Napa Valley) - 100% Cabernet Sauvignon matured for 20 months in 60% new French oak. Bright, deep purple; aromas of milk chocolate, black cherry, blackcurrant and raspberry preserves. Medium-full to full-bodied (15.5% alcohol), with excellent ripeness, the wine is well-structured and has medium-full, youthful tannins that need a few years to round out. The oak notes are slightly assertive, but nicely integrated, and there is good acidity and

ultra-impressive persistence. A beautiful expression of Stags Leap District typicity; peak in 15-20 years. (94)

**Chimney Rock Cabernet Sauvignon Tomahawk Vineyard 2021 Stags Leap District** (Napa Valley) 100% Cabernet Sauvignon; aged for 18 months in 70% new French oak barrels. Bright, medium deep purple; expressive aromas of black currant, black cherry, licorice and a hint of sweet tobacco. Medium-full, with impressive concentration, very good acidity, medium-full, velvety tannins and excellent persistence. The oak notes are perfectly integrated. This is classic Stags Leap style with significant charm; supremely elegant. Peak in 15-20 years. (95)

**Silverado Vineyards Cabernet Sauvignon “Solo” 2021** (Stags Leap District, Napa Valley) - 100% Cabernet Sauvignon from a single vineyard surrounding the vineyard. Bright, medium deep purple; aromas of black currant, blueberry, cassis, black plum and lavender. Medium-full, with excellent concentration; rich mid-palate; impressive ripeness, very good acidity, well-integrated wood notes, significant persistence. This is a plus, lush style of Cabernet Sauvignon, complete with silky tannins. Impressive now for its ripeness and elegance, this is clearly a youngster and needs time; this should develop nicely over the next 10-15 years. (94)

**Stags’ Leap Winery Cabernet Sauvignon 2021 “The Leap”** (Stags Leap District, Napa Valley) - A blend of 90% Cabernet Sauvignon, 5% Petit Sirah, 3% Petit Verdot and 2% Malbec; the wine is a barrel selection of the best Cabernet Sauvignon blocks, lots and cooperages each vintage. Bright, deep, almost inky purple; textbook aromas of black currant, black plum, mint and black peony. Medium-full, with an impressive mid-palate, excellent ripeness and very good acidity. The tannins are silky smooth, while the oak is perfectly integrated. There is excellent persistence along with notable complexity and classic Stags Leap District typicity. So well made and so appealing now, this could be enjoyed with a filet tonight, but the wine has the concentration and character for the long haul, all the while displaying finesse and charm. Peak in 20-25 years. (96)

One final note: There is too often some confusion about how to spell Stags Leap, so a brief explanation, which believe it or not, is based on the use of an apostrophe. A court decision declared that the Stags’ Leap Winery would use the apostrophe after the final “s,” while it would come before the “s” regarding Stag’s Leap Wine Cellars (both of these wineries are members of the Stags Leap District Winegrowers), while the district name of Stags Leap would not contain an apostrophe. Easy, isn’t it?